

Stress, anxiety, Resilience and Coping in Social Work Students
(A Study from India)

Selwyn Stanley, PhD

Senior Lecturer in Social Work

University of Wolverhampton, UK

selwyn.stanley@wlv.ac.uk

{ Corresponding author }

&

G. Mettilda Bhuvaneswari, PhD

Asst. Professor of Social Work,

Cauvery College for Women,

Tiruchirappalli, India

narmetm@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Social work is a stressful occupation but continues to attract large numbers of students every year. This study was conducted by undergraduate students of all three cohorts at a women's only college in Tiruchirapalli in South India (N=73). Standardised instruments to assess stress, anxiety, resilience and coping were administered. It was seen that anxiety and stress levels were relatively higher in the first and third year students while compared to those in the second year of their course, while resilience and coping was relatively lower in the first year group. Correlations were significantly positive for the stress and anxiety scores as well as the coping and resilience scores. However it was seen that only the anxiety scores significantly predicted the manifestation of stress in the students. Implications of the findings and the limitations of the study have also been discussed.

Key words: Social work students, social work education, anxiety, stress, resilience, coping

Social work is a rewarding but stressful occupation (Coffey et al., 2004; Collins, 2008).

Social work is a high stress profession that involves working with people in distressing circumstances such as victims of abuse, domestic violence, substance misuse, crime and other complex life situations. In recent years the profession has been under intense media scrutiny and social workers have had to work under increasing organisational constraints, budgetary limitations, the increasing need for services, unmanageable caseloads, changing policies and legislations adding to the pressure under which social workers operate. Not surprising then that according to Michael Wilshaw, the average career span of a social worker in the UK is only eight years (Coughlan, 2013). Stress has long been regarded as an integral part of social work practice with many contributing factors, including dealing with people under stress and stress arising from organizational and political contexts (Thompson et al., 1994). Several studies have looked at issues relating to stress (e.g. Coyle et al., 2005), resilience, job satisfaction, burn out (e.g. Evans et al., 2006) and coping (e.g. Collins, 2008) in professional social workers.

However not much attention has been paid to study similar issues in students of social work and most of the literature in this regard has emerged from the experiences of students in developed Western societies. Given the rigorous nature of training and high expectations associated with professional conduct and value based practice makes social work education a demanding task for those who opt to choose social work as a career. A brief review of this literature indicates that students of social work show high levels of psychological distress (Tobin and Carson, 1994). Often this could be due to being exposed to issues of poverty, child abuse, discrimination and cycles of hopelessness (Koeske & Koeske, 1991) associated with the nature of the profession. For many these are first time encounters with such real life situations and could be a hard hitting experience. Rigorous academic demands, coursework,

assessments and having to meet deadlines add to the pressure on students along with the intense demands of meeting agency requirements while on placement. Stressors associated with field placements have been well documented (Goldblatt & Buchbinder, 2003; Razack, 2001; Weaver, 2000). In addition many social work students in countries like the UK tend to be mature learners, with families to take care of as well as child care responsibilities and need to balance the demands of domestic and academic life. Added to this are the huge loans that students often incur to fund their education and living expenses.

These issues have not been investigated comprehensively in India where there are several Universities and affiliated colleges offering undergraduate and postgraduate courses in social work and the latter far outnumber the undergraduate courses. The Indian educational scenario is quite different from that in the West. Students fresh out of school seek admission in higher education in Universities and colleges before moving into the employment sector. As such those entering undergraduate courses (including social work) are predominantly in the 17-18 year age group with hardly any life experience unlike their western counterparts who bring with them some work/life experience when they start higher education. Expenses on education are met by parents even if educational loans are availed for their children.

The social work curriculum also requires students to study additional 'mandatory' subjects such as English and the vernacular or other optional subjects. Field placements usually are offered in the final year of the degree and tend to be quite intense involving weekly report writing and meeting curricular expectations relating to practicing methods of social work (such as casework, group work and community development activities) with individuals, groups and communities. Placements are usually with third sector agencies involved with developmental activities in villages and slum communities. The lack of trained social workers

in many placement agencies puts the onus of supervision largely on academic tutors to whom students are assigned for the duration of the placement. While the theoretical content is similar to what is taught in the west, the emphasis on reflective practice emphasised in the west, is not something which undergraduate students in India are well acquainted with. Assessments are through mid-term and end of term/semester examinations and the emphasis is on 'knowledge' and being able to present their reading in these written examinations which usually last for three hours and are marked not by their subject teacher but usually by a pool of anonymous examiners. Added to this is the awareness that at the end of three intense years of study they will be entering a profession that is neither as remunerative as other vocations, nor enjoys the kind of social standing, acceptance or recognition that other professions do. The complexity of being a social work student in India or elsewhere hence is undoubtedly an immense stressor and requires a great deal of resilience and coping skills to meet the demands of academia.

However there has hardly been any research on the experience of undergraduate social work students in India. A search of publications on these issues relating to social work students in India turned up only one publication which compared undergraduate students of social work from the UK with those from colleges in south India on issues relating to stress, support and wellbeing (Coffey et al., 2014). The study found that British students reported significantly higher levels of demands and significantly lower levels of support but manifested significantly higher levels of well-being than their Indian counterparts.

Anxiety has been defined as "an unpleasant emotional state or condition which is characterised by subjective feelings of tension, apprehension and worry, and by activation or arousal of the autonomic nervous system (Spielberger, 1972: p. 482). Stress has been defined

as a “particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being” (Lazarus and Folkman (1984): p. 19). Both individual and contextual factors influence the experience of stress, as well as the individual’s cognitive perception and behavioural responses to the perceived stressor. Anxiety then is an aversive emotional state that one may experience when faced with a stressful situation. Related to the experience of stress and anxiety is the ability to deal or cope with the perceived stressor. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (p. 141). Resilience is seen as a characteristic that enables individuals not only to overcome adversity but also to thrive when facing a crisis (Richardson, 2002). It refers to ‘the potential to exhibit resourcefulness by using available internal and external resources in response to different contextual and developmental challenges’ (Pooley and Cohen (2010): p. 34).

This study seeks to explore the experience of undergraduate work students from India in terms of the anxiety and stress experienced by them as well as to ascertain their resilience and extent of coping that they bring to dealing with these issues. As far as we are aware this is the first study which has dealt with such variables and compares their manifestation in students across all three years of their degree. Another unique feature of this study is that the respondents have been drawn from an undergraduate social work programme run by a college exclusively for women.

Objectives of the study

1. To portray the socio-demographic profile of undergraduate students of social work in a women's college in Tiruchirappalli, India.
2. To assess the manifestation of dimensions such as stress, anxiety, resilience and coping in these students.
3. To compare students of different stages/years of their degree course across these dimensions.
4. To ascertain correlations if any between these subject dimensions and with socio-demographic variables.
5. To identify which of the subject dimensions studied predict stress levels in the respondents.

Methods

Research design

The study used survey methodology for data collection and is cross-sectional in nature. A descriptive design that includes elements of a comparative nature to enable comparisons among different categories of respondents as well as between year groups of students has also been followed.

Measures

1. Self-prepared schedule to collect socio-demographic data.
2. Anxiety and stress subscales of the Depression, Anxiety and Stress scales (DASS 21) Lovibond & Lovibond (1995) were administered to the respondents. They were required to rate each item on a scale from 0 to 1 based on whether the statement applied to them or not. Higher scores reflect higher levels of stress and anxiety.

3. The Connor-Davidson Resilience scale (2003) (CD-RISC) comprises of 25 items, each rated on a 5-point scale (0-4), with higher scores reflecting greater resilience. It measures the notion of personal competence, high standards, and tenacity, tolerance of negative affect, the positive acceptance of change, and secure relationships, control and spiritual influences.
4. Coping was assessed with the Brief Cope Scale (Carver, 1997) and has 26 items that measure aspects such as: Self-distraction, Venting, Active coping, Positive reframing, Denial, Planning, Self-blame, Use of emotional support, Humour, Use of instrumental support, Acceptance, Behavioural disengagement and Religion.

Setting for the study

Tamilnadu is the southernmost state in India and shares its borders with the adjacent states of Kerala and Karnataka. The state capital is Chennai (formerly Madras) and the vernacular spoken in the state is Tamil which has a rich Dravidian heritage. As per details from Census 2011, Tamil Nadu has a population of 7.21 crores, and forms 5.96 percent of the total population of India with a sex ratio of 996. The population density is 1,437 to a square mile and the overall literacy rate for the state is 80.09 %. Tiruchirappalli, also known as Trichy or Tiruchi was known as Trichinopoly in colonial times and is geographically located almost centrally in the state. It is located on the banks of the river Cauvery and is a major hub for the Indian Railways and also a leading center for education.

Cauvery College is a college for women and a leading provider of higher education in the city. It is a self-financing college (receives no Government funds) that was established in 1984 and is run by a private educational trust. It is an arts and science college affiliated to the Bharathidasan University and offers fourteen undergraduate three year degree programmes

and nine two year post graduate courses including social work at both levels. The college caters to about 4000 students at all levels.

Data collection

Permission for the study was obtained from the Principal of the college and was cleared by the ethics review panel of the institution. Students in each year (stages 1, 2 and 3) of the social work undergraduate degree were briefed about the nature of the study. It was emphasised that participation was entirely voluntary and that they could stop filling up the questionnaires at any point without assigning any reasons and would not be contacted again. They were also told that their non-participation or discontinuation would in no way have any influence on their academic life in the college. Informed consent was obtained from students of each year group who turned up for being enlisted as respondents for the study. Data was collected on pre-determined dates at the beginning of the academic year in June 2014, collectively from each year group by the second author who was available during the session for any clarifications relating to the items of the questionnaires. Respondents were not required to provide their name, roll number or any other personal identifying data.

Respondents of the study

Data was collected from 73 students who offered to participate and turned up for data collection and details of students enrolled in each year as well as those enlisted for the study are presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

RESULTS

Socio-demographic profile of respondents

The mean age of the respondents was 18.59 and ranged from 16 to 24 years, the majority (68.5%) being in the 18-19 year age group. The vast majority came from Hindu families (90.4%) and the remaining from a Christian background. The majority (68.5%) of students came from a rural background and from nuclear families (83.6%). 43.8% of them had only one sibling and 46.6% were the eldest child in the family. The vast majority (79.5%) had previously gone to schools where the medium of instruction was Tamil (vernacular) and the remaining had attended English medium schools. The majority of these schools (57.5%) were located in rural areas. The majority of students during their school days (78.1%) as well as currently in college (64.4%) lived with their parents and the remaining stayed/were staying in student hostels. Educational background of parents was considerably low with the majority of parents having studied at different levels up to higher secondary school. 2.7 percent of fathers and 15 percent of mothers had never been to school. The father was the main breadwinner in most families and the majority (50.7%) were engaged in farming or employed as casual labourers (called 'coolie' in the vernacular), while the majority (76.7%) of mothers were home makers and not in paid employment. The reported total monthly family income ranged from Rupees 1,000 to 70,000 with a mean of Rupees 11,100 (approx. 178 USD) per month. The socio-demographic profile reflects a lower-middle class background with low parental levels of education and income.

Regarding their motivation to do a social work degree the majority reported it was encouragement received from family and friends (56%) and 30% said they were influenced by their former teachers. The majority (84%) said their career aspiration was to become a social worker/counsellor with others wanting to join other professions. 98.6 percent felt that they had made the right choice of joining this degree and used words like happy (16.4%), interesting (27.4%) and useful (24.7%) when asked their opinion about the course. When the 2nd and 3rd year students were asked if the course had changed them in any way, some of the

responses received were that it had increased their awareness of social problems (23%); they had started helping other (24%), and that it had changed their behaviour (13%) and attitude (8%) towards others; however 24% felt that the course had not brought about any significant change in them.

Stress, Anxiety, Resilience and Coping

Table 2 shows the extent to which students of all three years manifested the subject dimensions.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 2 shows that stress and anxiety levels are high in newly admitted students (1st year) and highest in 3rd year students but lower in students in their 2nd year. However both resilience and coping scores increase with the year of study being lowest in the 1st year and highest in the final year of the course.

Insert Table 3 about here

One way analysis of variance

In the next phase of analysis students of all three years were compared with regard to the subject dimensions using one way analysis of variance, results of which are presented in Table 3. The results indicate significant statistical differences on all the subject dimensions based on their year of study. Post hoc Scheffe analyses reveal that the differences were significant between all the three cohorts (1st & 2nd year; 2nd & 3rd year as well as 1st & 3rd year students) for the stress, anxiety as well as coping scores. However, for the resilience scores the difference was statistically significant only for the 1st and 3rd year students (but not between 1st & 2nd year or 2nd & 3rd year students).

Insert Table 4 about here

t test comparisons

Students were then compared based on differences in socio-demographic variables such as rural/urban background; medium of instruction prior to joining the social work degree (in school) and whether they were hostellers or day scholars. t test results in Table 4 show no significant differences among respondents differentiated on these variables (N=73).

Insert Table 5 about here

Correlational analysis

Pearsons correlation coefficients were computed among the subject dimensions studied as well as with other numerical background variables such as age, duration of parents' education and their income. The inter-correlation matrix (Table 5) shows highly significant positive correlations between the anxiety and stress scores as well as the resilience and coping scores for all students. Significant correlations are also seen between the stress and coping scores as well. In terms of background factors there is a significant positive correlation between the age of the students' and coping ($r = 0.27$; $p < 0.05$). A negative correlation was seen between fathers' education (number of years) and students' anxiety ($r = -0.27$; $p < 0.05$) and their mothers' income and stress levels ($r = -0.25$; $p < 0.05$). However fathers' income, mothers' education, number of siblings or students' birth order did not enter into any significant correlations with any of the subject dimensions.

Multiple regression analysis

A multiple regression was conducted to see if anxiety, resilience and level of coping predicted the manifestation of stress in the respondents. Using the enter method it was found from the ANOVA table that resilience, coping and anxiety levels explained a significant amount of the variance (47 percent) in the manifestation of stress in the students ($F(3, 62) = 20.22$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = 0.47$, $R^2_{\text{Adjusted}} = 0.45$). The analysis also showed that resilience (β

=0.02, $t(69) = 0.14$, ns) and coping ($\beta = 0.09$, $t(69) = 0.92$, ns) did not significantly predict the manifestation of stress. However the level of anxiety significantly did predict the level of stress experienced by the respondents ($\beta = 0.67$, $t(69) = 7.40$, $p < 0.001$).

Implications

The findings suggest that both 1st and 3rd year social work undergraduate students need extra measures to deal with the anxiety and stress that they experience. For 1st year students this means that conscious attention needs to be paid during the induction of students as soon as they enrol on the programme. At present this is not being done in a planned manner to brief students about the nature of the course, the institutional ethos, the subjects that they will be taught and aspects relating to assignments, examinations, evaluation and other academic requirements. They also need to be made aware of various institutional procedures, infrastructure and support systems available to them. A one week 'induction programme' could be planned by the department to orient the freshers about these issues. It is also suggested that the academic lead (staff member) for the 1st year cohort should meet with the whole group at least once a month to enable students to vocalise their difficulties and to seek clarification on various issues that they perceive to be difficult. Student tutorials are a practice that could immensely benefit students in the first year and the department may consider assigning four or five students to a named tutor who has weekly/fortnightly meetings with these students, enables them to share their anxieties and to seek support and clarification from their tutor.

Final year students could also benefit from such support systems (tutor groups, monthly cohort meetings) being put into place. Their anxieties usually revolve around clearing their final examination and any arrears (examinations not passed in the previous years) that add to their academic baggage, anxieties relating to whether to pursue a postgraduate degree or to explore vocational options. Social work is not seen as a remunerative career option and the

pressure to economically contribute to one's family of origin, which has funded their education, is often an issue for many first generation learners. The title of 'social worker' is not protected by statute and there is increasing competition in the employment market from students from allied disciplines. Most social work students will eventually find employment in the private/voluntary sector which is a thriving but largely unregulated area of employment. A series of sessions inviting well placed alumni of the department to share experiences with students in the final year will serve as a morale booster. Many of them would be under pressure from their families to get married on course completion. A personal tutor assigned to them will enable them to better navigate difficulties and anxieties in their personal and academic lives.

Limitations

The absence of a comparative group of non-social work students from other degree programmes limit drawing inferences relating whether the manifestation of the subject dimensions on the social work degree is relatively 'high' or 'low' when compared to students from other degree programmes.

The cross-sectional nature of the study does not provide an insight if the dimensions studied increase or decrease over time as students progress from one year to the next of their degree. A major limitation in terms of statistical analyses is that it does not take into consideration how life experiences have shaped the personality of individuals which could have a major impact in how resilience develops and influences perceptions relating to life events and stressors.

Features unique to the design and delivery of taught content as well as those that arise from the placement experiences of students owing to contextual factors limit the generalisation of findings to other undergraduate social work programmes in India and elsewhere.

As the respondents were drawn from a women's college only, it is not possible to say whether the experiences of students in colleges for men only or in co-educational institutions is similar.

Conclusion

This study compared students across three years of their undergraduate social work degree in a women's college in Trichy, Tamil Nadu, India. In spite of the limitations pointed out earlier, this study adds to the extant literature on undergraduate social work student experiences in India. It shows that entrants to the degree and those in the final year of their course experience more stress and anxiety when compared to students in the second year. For students in the first year of study this could be owing to uncertainties relating to the 'newness' of their programme of study and the nature of the programme which is quite 'different' from conventional academic degrees. For third year students, this could be due to anxieties relating to employment and career. Also for many women students' getting a college degree is also seen as the right time to get married and start a family and there could be anxieties relating to this. The findings of the study point towards the need to provide additional support services for students to deal with their personal situation and experiences of student life.

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Table 1*Table depicting the number of students enrolled and enlisted for the study*

Year/Stage of study	Students enrolled	Respondents
1	39	34
2	32	22
3	28	17
Total	99	73

Table 2*Distribution of respondents by mean scores on subject dimensions and year of study*

Year of study	Stress	Anxiety	Resilience	Coping
1	8.56	8.85	64.32	65.79
2	4.94	6.59	69.82	68.00
3	11.82	12.55	74.68	75.27

Table 3*One Way Analysis of Variance based on Year of Study for all Subject Dimensions*

Variable	Source	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	p
Stress	Between Groups	2	454.77	227.39	21.04	.000
	Within Groups	70	756.60	10.81		
	Total	72	1211.37			
Anxiety	Between Groups	2	362.13	181.07	11.18	.000
	Within Groups	70	1133.84	16.20		
	Total	72	1495.97			
Resilience	Between Groups	2	1459.84	729.92	3.46	.037
	Within Groups	70	14770.68	211.01		
	Total	72	16230.52			
Coping	Between Groups	2	1230.10	615.05	8.05	.001
	Within Groups	70	5349.92	76.43		
	Total	72	6580.02			

Table 4*t test results on subject dimensions and selected socio-demographic variables*

Variables		*Stress			*Anxiety			*Resilience			*Coping		
		Mean	SD	t	Mean	SD	t	Mean	SD	t	Mean	SD	t
Nativity	Rural (50)	8.76	3.99	0.19	9.10	4.51	0.93	68.38	14.82	0.29	69.80	9.32	0.84
	Urban (23)	8.57	4.44		10.17	4.67		69.47	15.73		67.78	10.14	
Medium of Instruction	English (15)	8.80	3.99	0.11	8.53	4.16	0.86	67.27	13.82	0.42	68.53	9.02	0.29
	Tamil (58)	8.67	4.17		9.67	4.67		69.10	15.40		69.33	9.76	
Residential Status	Hostellers (26)	8.46	4.40	0.37	9.08	5.18	0.50	69.46	12.46	0.31	70.69	8.93	1.02
	Day scholars (47)	8.83	3.96		9.64	4.22		68.32	16.37		68.32	9.88	

*df=71; p>0.05

Note: Figures in parentheses are respondent numbers

Table 5*Inter-correlation matrix for subject dimensions*

Dimensions	Stress	Anxiety	Resilience	Coping
Stress	1	0.68**	0.16	0.20*
Anxiety	0.68**	1	0.19	0.18
Resilience	0.16	0.19	1	0.48**
Coping	0.20*	0.18	0.48**	1

*p<0.05; **p<0.001